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ABSTRACT

The mental health/education outreach training model to prevent special education teacher career attrition is based on the assumption that if one member of a relational system has a problem, then the entire system has a problem. High special education teacher attrition rates are contrasted with lower estimates for the teaching profession as a whole. The unrecognized special education teacher relational issues which are similar to the dysfunctions found in family interactions can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These include: (1) fusion; (2) triangulation; (3) problem ownership; (4) defensive response style; and (5) the maintenance of expectations for parents and children at some level other than zero. The outreach training model content and specific strategies discussed in this paper focus on a choice "intervention" based on the premise that a perception of "no choice" in changing self-perceptions and behaviors on the part of teachers interacting with children and parents breeds poor mental health. The model focuses on preventing the intimidation and resentment that are precursors of this poor mental health resulting in the well publicized special education teacher career attrition. There needs to be a therapeutic line of support for teachers to help them learn to approach children and parents with systematic healthy objectivity during the inevitable problem times and rough spots which occur while teaching. Enhancing educational training through an outreach model is one way to ensure such support. (Author/CL)

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UTILIZING A MENTAL HEALTH/EDUCATION OUTREACH TRAINING MODEL TO PREVENT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER CAREER ATTRITION

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ABSTRACT

The mental health/education outreach training model to prevent special education teacher career attrition is based on the assumption that if one member of a relational system has a problem, then the entire system has a problem. If special educators are troubled enough to leave their profession at the current alarmingly high rate, then systems in which they exist must also be in trouble. Annual turnover rates for special education teachers have been estimated to be as high as between 30 to 50% with several states reporting almost complete turnover occurring every three years (NRP, 1979). An Idaho study (Schrag, 1978) indicated that during the period 1968 to 1976 on the average of 46% of the entire special education teaching force left that state after only two years of teaching. These figures are contrasted with the National Education Association estimates that for the academic year 1977-78, teacher attrition rates for all teaching positions was approximately 5.9% of the teachers employed during that school year (NEA, 1979). The unrecognized special education teacher relational issues which are similar to the dysfunctions found in family interactions can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These include: (1) fusion; (2) triangulation; (3) problem ownership; (4) defensive response style; and (5) the maintenance of expectations for parents and children at some level other than zero. The outreach training model content and specific strategies discussed in this paper focus on a choice "intervention" based on the premise that a perception of "no choice" in changing self perceptions and behaviors on the part

of teachers interacting with children and parents breeds poor mental health. The model focuses on preventing the intimidation and resentment that are precursors of this poor mental health resulting in all too well publicized special education teacher career attrition. There needs to be a therapeutic line of support for teachers to help them learn to approach children and parents with systematic healthy objectivity during the inevitable problem times and rough spots which occur while teaching. Enhancing educational training through an outreach model is one way to ensure such support.

BURNOUT AND THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER CAREER ATTRITION DILEMMA

The mental health/education outreach training model to prevent special education teacher career attrition is based on the assumption that if one member of a relational system has a problem, then the entire system has a problem. If special educators are troubled enough to leave their profession at the current alarmingly high rate, then systems in which they exist must also be in trouble. Annual turnover rates for special education teachers have been estimated to be as high as between 30 to 50% with several states reporting almost complete turnover occurring every three years (NRP, 1979). An Idaho study (Schrag, 1978) indicated that during the period 1968 to 1976 on the average of 46% of the entire special education teaching force left that state after only two years of teaching. These figures are contrasted with the National Education Association estimates that for the academic year 1977-78, teacher attrition rates for all teaching positions was approximately 5.9% of the teachers employed during that school year (NEA, 1979). The loss of productivity, program stability and quality of services created within an organization by excessive turnover according to Hayes (1980) is a serious and costly problem which requires excessive recruiting, hiring, and assigning of new employees. Other factors include the potential loss of morale for remaining employees as well as reduction in the quality of treatment programs delivered to the handicapped

child. It has been suggested that one of the major underlying causes of special education teacher career attrition is burnout.

THE APPLICATION OF RELATIONAL OR INTERACTIONAL THEORY TO SPECIAL EDUCATORS, CHILDREN AND PARENTS

However, burnout occurs too frequently to represent examples of individual, isolated special education teacher pathology. The notion of burnout is, in the main, rather more likely to be symptomatic than causative per se. The underlying suspected source of system rather than individual dysfunction which most likely contributes to this phenomena may also not be the most obvious, that is, educational systems in general. According to Freudenberger (1975), stress is felt because special educators are typically trained to be child focused, attending to individual needs and differences, and as a result, when children do not readily respond and learn in a manner which is congruent with the notion of the good or excellent teacher they perceive themselves to be, they may become disappointed, frustrated, and angry at themselves, their students, and parents. The unrecognized special education teacher career attrition issues are interactional and relational and in many ways are similar to the dysfunctions observed in family systems (Barragan, 1976). Furthermore, special education teachers under stressful circumstances may situationally become "parent like" in their frustration when things do not go the way they are expected to in dealing with children and their parents. It is interesting to note that the face validity for this assumption has always been available to us. All that

is needed is to pay attention to teachers talking about how difficult it is for even the most competent among them to teach their own children. Most teachers report that it is difficult for them to not get emotional and many teachers report that they just plain "lose it" even though they are trying not to get frustrated and angry at their child during home instruction. It seems that the common denominator of teacher/child/parent dysfunction is that no one quite seems to know how to extricate themselves from the problems at hand. The most obvious deficiency seems to be that while parents and teachers may be trained in parenting skills per se, it is less likely that they would have received training and be skilled in systemic relational interactions. This training and skill deficiency, and the difficulties of teaching and parenting a child with special needs contributes to child-focuses and problem oriented teaching and parenting behaviors which may serve to keep a child dependent and members of the relational system, teachers, children and parents, dysfunctional, (Parker & Cooper, 1982). While not causative per se, teacher dysfunction in these interactional areas may support symptoms in children and their parents which contribute to the special educator's feelings of frustration, poor mental health, and burnout.

The unrecognized special education teacher relational issues which are similar to the dysfunctions found in family interactions can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These include: (1) fusion; (2) triangulation; (3) problem ownership;

(4) defensive response style; and (5) the maintenance of expectations for parents and children at some level other than zero. The outreach training model content and specific strategies discussed in this paper focus on a choice "intervention" based on the premise that a perception of "no choice" in changing self perceptions and behaviors on the part of teachers interacting with children and parents breeds poor mental health. The model focuses on preventing the intimidation and resentment that are precursors of this poor mental health resulting in all too well publicized special education teacher career attrition. There needs to be a therapeutic line of support for teachers to help them learn to approach children and parents with systematic healthy objectivity during the inevitable problem times and rough spots which occur while teaching. Enhancing educational training through an outreach model is one way to ensure such support.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE AND INDIVIDUAL PROTECTION FROM BURNOUT

Our primary goal as human beings who also happen to be special educators is to take care of ourselves. If we have anything left over, we may elect to give this surplus "okayness" to others. We take care of ourselves through wellness lifestyles (Ryan & Travis, 1981), and by understanding the dynamics of human systems theories and choosing to apply these concepts so fundamental to wellbeing and change. Each of the identified systemic functional concerns mentioned, fusion, triangulation, problems ownership, defensive responsive style and expectations maintained for children and parents at some level other than

zero suggest specific strategies developed for outreach training model participant "choices" for change. Without these protective lifestyles, knowledge and understandings, we may not have any okayness left over to give to our professional activities and burnout may result.

Fusion

According to Fogarty (1976), all persons seek closeness and this is one of the most basic assumptions of systems theory. However, with closeness comes increased levels of stress, emotionality, and expectations. Individuals may find it difficult to be close while maintaining healthy space. Moreover, the energy behind fusion, the hope of meeting one's needs by uniting with or vicariously living through another may result in heightened personal dissatisfaction. Fusion results in blending and an inappropriate out of balance sense of what we owe ourselves and what we owe others. As one outreach training model participant wrote in her self treatment plan, "I do feel so responsible for the lives of my kids in my class and their families that I felt I wasn't coping with my own life. I am irritable, think only of school problems, wake up with nightmares, am tense, and have dread feelings. My own personal life feels almost non-existent. I feel like I can't handle it much longer as a teacher and I need to escape the rut I've got myself into."

In order to reduce the tension created by fusion, outreach training model participants are instructed in the "choices" of professional boundaries, healthy objectivity, individuation,

and distancing through strategies which help them to break the rules that are maintaining fusion and the stress that results from this dysfunctional closeness.

In the view of Shaw et al (1979), the specific factors creating stress for special educators include: (1) writing IEP's due process paperwork; (2) dealing with parents regarding placement decisions and parent conferences; (3) job related work after hours; (4) related activities such as duty periods and faculty meetings; (5) pupil load; (6) diagnosis and assessment; and (7) dealing with other teachers.

It is not surprising that documenting the child's problem through the IEP process and dealing with parents are considered the number one and two factors creating stress for special educators, considering how confused and blended the roles of teachers, parents and children in special education have become. In many ways, special education teachers are made to believe that if they are not all things to all people, then they are not doing a good job as teachers. In order to help special educators break this rule and choose healthy professional boundaries, the following guidelines are presented during outreach training sessions. Through a combination of didactic instruction, catharisis interviewing, large and small group discussion, and writing self treatment plans, special education teachers begin to choose to : (1) not parent their students, even those who come from homes who have parents judged by the teacher as being inadequate; (2) only teach during school hours, which means that at home

teachers should parent and not teach; (3) make and keep appointment-only interviews with parents, discouraging drop-in visits; (4) avoid playing "ain't it awful" with parents and others, particularly on topics which are personal, gossipy, or otherwise not related to teaching and learning and; (5) give fewer, more meaningful homework assignments and tests, including those which can be self corrected during class time so that time away from the classroom can be spent engaging in non-teaching related activities which facilitate the reduction of stress.

Triangulation

Bowe(1976) believes that when the tension in a two-person system becomes overloaded, then a dysfunctional three-person triangle is formed. Usually at the center of this triangle in family and school disputes is the child who is producing some behavior that is of concern to either a teacher or his parents. However, in triangulation, the communication is routed inappropriately through the wrong person, creating frustration, angry feelings and stress. The comments of a mental health education outreach training model participant typifies the angry feelings and stress created by triangulation. "Ricky's mom frustrates me. On an average of twice a week she sends a note to school such as "You forgot to send Ricky's notebook home, please send tonight," or Tuesday's note might read, "Send Monday's parent letter home today." This implies to me that she is saying "Get on the ball lady!" To me, the forgotten things aren't too terrible. I feel like I am being challenged. How do I

handle this? So far I haven't. Maybe now I need to have a conference together, get our expectations out in the air. I feel like I have many important things to do with the children all day and if I forget to send a parent letter on Monday, so what! We are busy at school." Outreach training model participants are instructed in problem solving strategies and functional interactions utilized to develop and maintain healthy "twosomes". Of significant importance during this phase of the mental health training program is helping teachers to recognize triangulation and the stress that can result when a third person is used to judge, solve or arbitrate a dispute (Kramer,1983). In the aforementioned example, the teacher-parent conference was utilized to help Ricky's mother communicate directly with Ricky regarding getting his notebook home as well as getting classnotes home. With the help of Ricky's teacher, Ricky and his mother can become a healthy twosome attempting to achieve the desired results without making the teacher responsible for Ricky's behavior, particularly since these are behaviors which Ricky is capable of producing on his own. As expressed in the example, triangulation can have the effect of robbing Ricky of important opportunities to be responsible for his own behavior, triangulation also sets the teacher up for failure because only Ricky can really be responsible for his own behavior. It is the teacher's role in this case to say to Ricky's parent when she says that he forgot his notebook, "That sounds like something you might want to share with Ricky." These healthy twosomes and professional

boundaries help teachers and parents to reduce stress by not getting triangulated.

Problem Ownership

Along with fusion and triangulation, clarifying problem ownership may also work as an anti-burnout tool which minimizes anxiety and stress between teachers, parents and children. The most basic rule of thumb necessary for choosing not to own others' problems which is shared with outreach training model participants is the notion that the only change one can make is a change in self and that teachers should not even try to change parents, that job would be up to the parents. Written comments made by outreach training model participants indicate that in many ways, problem ownership is contributing to overall systems stress. For example, one participant wrote, " I have concerns with helping parents improve their overall parenting skills" and another wrote, " I have concerns with marital family tension and breakup over having a handicapped child." While these may be real concerns, outreach training model participants are instructed in the basics of "systems limited responsibility" (Beavers, 1983). This limited responsibility may be necessary because as in the examples given, there is a likelihood that with the significant presenting difficulties, persons may already be confused as to where one's own responsibilities begin and end and another's begins and ends. Despite the seemingly overwhelming nature of the parent and child's problems, outreach training

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model participants are instructed in notions which include; (1) not using right/wrong, fault or blame when there is emotional upheaval occurring in a family system; (2) never reason with feelings, particularly strong emotional feelings concerning a child's handicap or marital discord. For example, it is suggested to outreach training participants that rather than trying to rush in with explanations and answers for these types of significant problems which often is the temptation with helping professionals' techniques which maintain boundaries and allow families as well as children to define themselves by their own struggles need to be utilized. Simple phrases which teachers can use such as "Say more about that," or "Really!" tend to keep problems ownership in check; and (3) because each system reality interacts with others, it is not necessary to define one system level as the only significant one. This will allow teachers to maintain the environment that they do control, the classroom, as a potentially productive one even for a child with significant physical learning or emotional handicaps even though he is from a dysfunctional, disheartening family. Significant stress and burnout can result when teachers own the problems of not only their own classroom but the dysfunction of the child's family as well.

Defensive Response Style

Because feelings and emotions may run high, teachers are often spoken to by parents in a manner that contributes significantly to stress, frustration, and angry feelings. One outreach training model participant wrote, "In my experience, I was verbally attacked,

threatened, and told I was stupid by a parent, [and that] I was not teaching her child." What to do with these feelings is a significant problem for teachers and contributes greatly to burnout and the anxiety related to parent conferencing and interaction. The basic assumption of the outreach training model is that defensive response takes ownership. That is, when the teacher responds to the heat of the moment and attempts to provide a defense, the teacher has bought the problem. The best rule of thumb is to not defend oneself vis a vis the accusations and the intensity of the emotion, or to try to reason with these emotions, but rather use a reflective empathetic style, techniques which can keep teachers from getting hooked emotionally and help them stay with the parents' agenda thus insuring the highest chance that communication will remain open. Empathy presupposes an awareness of relational boundaries and represents and example of healthy investment, also the ability to suspend personal agendas. Specifically, empathy techniques, according to Parker (1983), are utilized to: (1) gain more time to think and work with one's own feelings; (2) help others hear how they sound; (3) check to see if you heard correctly; (4) buy more time when you don't know what to say; (5) remain silent when you don't want to answer or offer advice to questions; (6) summarize what a parent has said; (7) change the locus of responsibility; (8) invite additional information without influencing the direction of the conversation and; (9) help the parent focus on the content rather than the emotion of what they said. Statements

such as "Reports cards and grading are an important issue" and, "It sounds like you would like to be kept more informed about homework assignments," represent a reflective empathetic teacher "choice" to becoming defensive when these are topics of upset. In essence, rather than being defensive, outreach training model participants are helped to reduce anxiety and stress by understanding the paradoxical notion that you get control by giving up control in emotionally charged situations.

The Maintenance of Expectations for Parents and Children at Some Level Other Than Zero

Perhaps the most difficult as well as the most controversial of all "choices" to make is the one which requires teachers to give up formulating expectations for children and parents. Outreach training model participants are confronted with the realization that any expectations for a child or his parents will by definition be too high or too low. Expectations for the most part meet the needs of the person who establishes the expectation and not in the case of teachers, the child, or the parents. Because we can change ourselves, we may have expectations for ourselves. However, the most appropriate levels of expectations for others, including children and parents, would be at or around the zero level. In this regard, teachers will consistently be pleased and surprised at what children can accomplish and can be truly happy for the accomplishments they have made for themselves as teachers without the resentment of missed expectations. While controversial, this notion can go a long way in reducing special education teacher stress, stress which results

in part from the fact that special students, particularly severely handicapped children, do not typically provide teachers with the obvious satisfactions of good behavior, affection, and rapid learning which make teaching immediately rewarding (Foster, 1980).

SUMMARY

In our rush to implement special education programs, we have forgotten to provide teachers with the tools they need to be objective in their relationships with parents and children. Tools which work to prevent career attrition. Instead, many teachers feel obligated to assume as problem ownership role which works to the detriment of themselves as well as children and parents. Special education teachers are letting us know that this system is not working, by leaving their profession and also, hopefully as an alternative effort, asking for help in building effective relationships with the parents of children with developmental disabilities and handicapping conditions, as well as the children themselves, relationships which allow teachers, parents and children to identify and use their individual rights and opportunities to grow. We need to facilitate teachers' understandings of how to help parents without feeling that they must attempt to solve and be responsible for family and personal problems. A child's failure to progress developmentally often stems from and is affected by the family and personal problems experienced by children as they interact with schools and teachers. Teachers themselves in an effort to be good teachers may become

emotionally charged and solution oriented. Teachers need to know what limitations to place on their own involvement and maintain their own mental health, particularly important in view of the high rate of job attrition in special education as a profession. The systems thinking utilized in the outreach training model is of course only one way to approach human interaction. However, its strength lies within the recognition that people want to change and that they want to define themselves and that they prefer these to resentment, stress, poor mental health, and burnout.

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